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## Thicker than water? Sperm donors and the question of relatedness

Who are you related to? For some people, this question does not have a straightforward answer. New reproductive technologies like donor insemination and IVF have challenged our understandings of kinship and relatedness, and advancements are happening **all the time**.

**More than 6,000** couples or single women had fertility treatment using donated gametes (sperm or eggs) in the UK in 2013. Many of those treatments will have led to the birth of a child—and a new network of potential relationships too, including between donor offspring and donors, their parents, partners, children... How, when, and to whom can those in these new networks consider themselves 'related'?

At the same time, while sperm donation was traditionally a very secretive affair, practices have become much **more open**. Debates about donor offspring's 'right to know' their genetic origins have led to changes in donor legislation in **many parts of the world**, including the **2005 UK law change** that mandated gamete and embryo donors be willing to release their identifying information to their offspring once they reach 16. This means that these new understandings of relatedness may soon have consequences for those donors and their offspring.

### 'The Vikings are Coming'

Not everywhere has shifted fully to an open model. Danish donors, for example, have the option to choose whether or not they want to donate anonymously or to release their identity to offspring. For many years, we have been told **that there is a shortage of donor sperm in the UK**. Denmark, on the other hand, is home to **the world's largest sperm bank network** and several other banks besides, facilitating hundreds of births every year. In 2015, **a BBC documentary** highlighted the numbers of British women who travelled to Denmark for treatment or ordered vials of Danish sperm from websites direct to their home for self-insemination.

I went to Denmark to talk to sperm donors about their experiences: what it was like to donate, what donation meant to them, and why they chose anonymity or otherwise. None of them had had any contact with their donor offspring, and most of them didn't know whether they had any offspring at all. However, all of them had imagined what kind of relationship they might have with those offspring in the future.

### The Knock on the Door

One of the most common images we see of sperm donors **in popular culture** is the man with hundreds of children, all of whom have the potential to show up, unannounced, at any time, desperate to find out about their donor. Uncertainty about just how many offspring

they might have ‘out there’ was a common theme in donors’ accounts. Laws governing numbers of children a Danish donor’s sperm could be used to produce were tightened in 2012 following a **scandal**, but many of the donors I spoke to had been donating for years before this. One anonymous donor had been tracking how many vials of his sperm had been sold on the sperm bank’s website and had a mounting fear about what would happen if all of those inseminations were successful, saying ‘I couldn’t have a social or personal relationship to all of them, if suddenly say 60 people got together and turned up, knocked on my door’. Donors like him were scared by their lack of control over the number of offspring they might have. They were also afraid of losing control over how they might meet those offspring: that they might just knock on the door one day without warning. On the other hand, some found the potential to have lots of offspring comforting as well as nerve-wracking: one donor told me, ‘even though it’s a little scary to think that I might have a hundred children, it’s a bit cool as well. So somewhere inside, I can think “alright, [my] genes are out there, I don’t have to worry”.’

Passing on genes was a common theme across the study. Donors often thought of themselves as the genetic or biological father of their offspring, differentiating themselves clearly from the social, recipient parents. One donor said, ‘we’re not related in any way, only by blood’. Donors questioned the value of **documentaries** they had seen about adopted or donor children seeking their biological family. To them, a personal connection with the recipient mother was an important factor in moving from being a biological father towards taking legal and/or emotional responsibility for offspring: ‘it’s not the same if, like, the mom goes to a vacation, falls in love with [someone]. There is no history, there is no emotions involved.’ In Janet Carsten’s **study** of adoption reunions, kinship bonds were ‘earned’ through hard work and the effort put into caring for a child, not bestowed automatically by fact of birth. Donors I spoke to negotiated fatherhood and responsibility in a similar way.

### Imagining Connections

So does that mean that donors never thought about the recipients of their donated sperm? Not necessarily. Many donors had thought about the types of people who might choose them as a donor from the **online donor catalogue**. These catalogues contain all kinds of information about sperm donors, including details about their appearance, their education, their occupation, their personality, and their family medical history. Some donors were confident that the type of people who selected them would be people who were of a similar social status to them, but others were concerned that those who chose them as donors might be ‘aspirational’ recipients seeking a higher status donor; the idea of the **genius sperm bank** where would-be mothers seek to produce genetically superior babies has firmly found a foothold in the **popular imagination**. Some participants were in favour of donors having more say over who might be allowed to use their sperm, arguing that they wanted to ensure that whoever was going to raise ‘their’ biological child were ‘good people’. However, none of the donors in the study wanted to actually meet any of the recipients of their sperm.

Donors, offspring, and recipient parents are not the only people who become connected when donor insemination is used. There is also a broad network of other connections including donors' partners, parents, children, other family members of the recipient parents, and other offspring of the same donor. Websites such as the **Donor Sibling Registry** have been set up to allow donor offspring to connect with their half-siblings and their donor (even if that donor turns out to have been **the fertility doctor**). But what of the family of anonymous donors who have no desire to seek out contact with their offspring? One donor, upon discovering from the sperm bank website that a successful pregnancy had been reported using his sperm, told his surprised mother that she could now 'unofficially call herself a grandmother'. The donor and his mother imagine a relationship between her and the offspring—but they have had no contact with the recipient and do not know for certain that a child has been born, despite knowing that there has been a successful pregnancy. This raises the question of how to talk and think about such issues. For instance, if a donor does not perceive himself as a father, is his mother permitted to perceive herself as a grandmother? These and other kinds of kinship relationships become complicated through sperm donation.

Donors in my study could imagine a broad range of potential relationships between themselves, their offspring, and their wider families. However, the extent to which they were interested in making contact with these kin or in developing these relationships further varied. As donor offspring conceived in the age of openness mature, complicated issues of relatedness will be something that donors—of sperm, eggs or mitochondria—and their kin increasingly have to address.

### **Further reading**

**Wheatley, A. (2017)** 'We're not related in any way, only by blood': Danish sperm donors and (imagined) relationships', *Families, Relationships & Societies*, <http://doi.org/b4jj>

Wheatley, A. (2017) 'Danish sperm donors and the ethics of donation and selection', *Medicine, Health Care & Philosophy*, <http://doi.org/ccqj> (Open Access)